

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 288 224

CS 505 802

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TITLE The Small Department: Curriculum in Transition.
PUB DATE Nov 87
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association (73rd, Boston, MA, November 5-8, 1987).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Business Communication; Business Education; Career Planning; Careers; *College Curriculum; *Course Content; Curriculum Development; Educational Change; *Educational Trends; Higher Education; Relevance (Education); Speech Communication; *Speech Curriculum; Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; Teacher Attitudes; Teacher Responsibility; Teacher Role; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS California; University of California Davis

ABSTRACT

Using the Rhetoric and Communication Department of the University of California at Davis as an example, this paper addresses the problems of small communications departments that face increasing student enrollments by both majors and students seeking to enhance their communications skills, with no additional faculty to handle such a load. After an introduction defining the characteristics of a small department, the paper raises the issue of careerism--the emphasis in undergraduate communication courses on teaching only those communication skills and applied theory required by the business community. After citing fallacies of careerism, such as the desire for a prescription of behaviors and skills without the necessary diagnostic training to know when to apply them, the paper describes changes resulting from careerism, including the booming popularity of business, professional speaking, and organizational communication courses. The paper argues that while large speech departments can create separate courses in attractive areas, the small department must adapt existing group communication courses to parallel the skills required by the business community. The paper concludes with a description of class activities and assignments accommodating the desire for increased career relevance, and with an admonition to retain the traditional theories, fundamentals, and general principles of communication in the midst of such changes. (Nine endnotes are included.) (JG)

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The Small Department: Curriculum in Transition

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Paper to be presented at the Seventy-Third Annual
Speech Communication Association Convention,
Boston, Massachusetts, November, 1987.

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The Small Department: Curriculum in Transition

Communication departments nationwide are experiencing rapid growth in student enrollment by both majors and students seeking to enhance their communication skills. Gibson, et al. found the basic communication course to be a requirement in nearly half of the colleges of education, colleges of arts and sciences, and the business schools surveyed¹. Large departments are expanding current course offerings to meet this increased demand. In addition, specialized service courses are being created to meet the needs of the business student. Some business departments have even hired communication faculty members to teach communication courses in their departments. While this new growth gives communication departments many opportunities to expand course offerings, it also poses problems and challenges for the small department.

The small department can be characterized by two factors: size of faculty and number of majors. Smitter and MacDoniels surveyed the catalogs of 61 small colleges and limited their study based on enrollment (less than 3000) and faculty size (fewer than six full-time faculty)². While this definition may be appropriate for small colleges, there are many small departments at large colleges and universities which share the problems and challenges of the small college department.

The University of California at Davis has an enrollment of over 17,000 students, yet the Rhetoric and Communication Department currently has only about 200 majors. We represent a small department at a major research institution and have a full-time permanent faculty of eight. However, during the eighties, we have seen our number of majors double while receiving no additional faculty to handle this load. In addition, our College of

Engineering requires either Public Speaking or Group Communication as a lower division prerequisite for admission for their nearly 2000 majors. Finally, students in all disciplines are taking communication courses in response to job listings that emphasize the need for effective communication skills. Therefore, we are trying to meet the varying needs and demands of our majors in addition to serving non-majors fulfilling university requirements and electives.

While faculty size and number of majors can help identify a small department, Smitter and MacDoniels found that the nature and character of the small department varies from institution to institution³. They concluded that the course offerings of a small department cannot be typified by the presence of a single course. Courses in Public Speaking, Argumentation, Interpersonal Communication, Fundamentals of Speech, Introduction to Mass Media, and Oral Interpretation may be offered by the small department but there is a lack of a common core of offerings. The Department of Rhetoric and Communication at Davis seems to fit this characterization. Our department does not offer courses in either Fundamentals of Speech or Oral Interpretation. We have a rich history in Rhetoric and require majors to take several courses in Rhetoric in addition to courses in Communication Theory, Advocacy, and Research Methods. Students also take one course from courses offered in each of the following five groups: message analysis, history of rhetorical theory, rhetorical criticism, applied communication contexts, and mass communication.

At Davis, faculty and graduate student teachers at our department's monthly basic courses forum share teaching ideas and techniques. During the past two years we have observed a number of students who approach

speech courses with a narrow learning focus. These students, in increasing numbers, seem to have an attitude that our course material is not relevant to their careers and is therefore unimportant. Faculty members have expressed their frustration at teaching these "careeristic" students. Some faculty feel that it is incumbent upon the teacher to make the material relevant. Some feel that it is incumbent upon the student to find relevance in the material. Graduate student teachers are seeking concrete answers and solutions to this problem and not a discussion of teaching philosophy. We are faced with the questions that careerism poses to many departments of communication. When did the emphasis on careerism begin? What do we mean by "careerism". What forms does careerism take? Who supports this emphasis? And how has it affected the small department?

Careerism is not a new phenomenon. In the 1970's, "a unique blend of historical, economic, and political elements" all contributed to record numbers of community college students opting for career programs rather than liberal arts/transfer programs⁴. This emphasis on career programs eventually began to affect four-year colleges and universities as well. Clark Kerr, President Emeritus of the University of California, noted in 1984:

"Everywhere among students there is a new emphasis on individual economic advancement through concentration on vocational subjects rather than on the total advancement of human life by developing new cultural interests or new interests, as citizens, in the welfare of American society and the world. The humanities have greatly declined, and the undergraduate professional schools have seen great growth."⁵

What form does careerism take in speech departments in our colleges and universities today? I offer the following definition of careerism: the emphasis on teaching only those communication skills and applied theory

required by the business community. This emphasis on what may be needed by the "real world" of business includes an inherent limitation - the exclusion of theories and skills which are not useful in the world of business but may be useful in other contexts.

The emphasis on careerism seems to come from two sources. In some cases, faculty are the source of careerism in courses. Some feel a strong need to provide students with career skills which will enable an easy transition into the initial job position. In most cases, it is our students who pressure us to provide them with more realism and "real-world" situations. These students say they have little use for abstract theory or concepts that cannot be applied in their careers.

Yet, at times, it seems that a job and a career are synonymous terms to both students and faculty. This lack of differentiation has greatly confused the careerism issue. Keith Griffin has suggested

"dividing the concept of 'career' into two parts, professions and jobs. Professions such as medicine, law and electrical contracting require the direct application of school-learned knowledge to the work task, while jobs like college president, sales manager, and bank executive require individuals to apply their talents not studied in a specific course or program.⁶"

This division seems particularly appropriate to the current careerism dilemma. Our students seem to have confused the requirements for professions with the requirements for many jobs. They are seeking prescriptive formulas for dealing with job situations.

This focus is in error on two key points. The first is that most students will be pursuing jobs rather than professional careers. These jobs will demand good judgment and careful utilization of communication skills in a variety of situations and events. Prescriptive formulas will be ineffective

since each situation will be unique, varying with the individuals involved in the interaction. The second error is the assumption that a finite list of communication skills are needed in business and that these skills can be applied in numerous situations. This ignores the fact that effective communication skills are contextual. Careeristic students desire a prescription of behaviors and skills, yet seem impatient or unwilling to learn the necessary diagnostic skills to know what skills to apply when the situation warrants. These students seem to be underinformed about the communication skills that are useful to the world of business.

Research surveys show that business wants individuals who are effective communicators in the oral and written modes. The business community wants individuals who are capable of persuasive and informative presentations to clients and associates. They want people who can think logically through a series of events and who can effectively solve problems as an individual and in groups. Eleven communication skills have been identified as skills that the business world requires: small-group facilitation, interviewing, problem-solving, public relations, listening, persuasion, motivation, conflict-resolution, speaking competence, relationship building, and questioning techniques⁷. These skills are relevant to many jobs regardless of the career field or business application. In addition, Johnson and Szczupakiewicz found the public speaking skills of informative speaking, handling questions and answers, and listening to be the skills most used by speech communication alumni⁸. The skills that alumni and business identify as important are those that transcend a particular job title or description and those that demand more than a simplistic prescriptive approach to effective communication. Yet, we find ourselves faced with students who demand

students who demand strategies to use in various business communication situations and small departments have responded in two distinct ways.

The careerism emphasis has affected the content of our courses and the strategies we use to teach them. Many departments are offering a course in Business and Professional speaking tailored, primarily, to give students skills in presentational and informational speaking. The key is to provide realistic speaking experiences that would be comparable to those found in the business environment. This course frequently substitutes for public speaking in meeting graduation requirements.

Organizational communication has become one of the hottest courses on many university campuses. Majors and non-majors alike are enrolling in these courses because they are seen by students as providing them with valuable skills and insight into the communication patterns of the corporate world. At Davis, the demand for our organizational communication course is twice what can be accommodated, in spite of offering the course twice a year as a large lecture class to 130 students. My interpersonal communication course had only 20 communication majors in a class of 120 people. The one hundred non-majors frequently cited professional development in addition to personal growth as reasons for enrolling in the course.

Large speech departments can and do offer courses that nearly parallel the skills required by the business community: interviewing, conflict-resolution, listening, persuasion, public relations are usually offered as separate courses. Introductory and advanced interpersonal communication courses teach students strategies for building relationships and intrapersonal communication courses help students understand the

internal and external factors of motivation. Effective problem-solving skills and leaderships skills are learned in small group communication classes.

The small department, however, is limited in the number of courses that can be taught due to faculty size and resources. It is a lengthy and difficult process to get a new course approved when the faculty are currently being stretched to their limits. The creation of new courses is one solution available to meet the demands of careerism that seems beyond the reach of many small departments.

While what we teach reflects part of the current focus on careerism, careerism has also influenced how we teach our courses. For the small department, it is this effect that is most profound. While small departments find that it is difficult to expand course offerings, it is somewhat easier to adjust course content to meet the growing demands of careerism.

At Davis, our basic courses (Public Speaking and Group Communication) have a large number of engineering and science students enrolled each term. Frequent student expressions of dissatisfaction with the relevance of the course material to chosen professions prompted several of our faculty to adjust the focus of the course material.

Informative speeches in public speaking classes were given increased relevance by having students explain basic concepts from their major fields of study. Persuasive speeches allowed students to sell products or services. Speeches of tribute encouraged students to speak on persons or events relevant to their fields of study.

Group communication courses often utilize simulations and exercises designed to give students realistic group experiences. An exercise picked up at a basic courses swap meet at a previous convention, the Egg Drop exercise, has been quite successful in illustrating the need for effective group and

interpersonal communication skills when solving the engineering problem of getting an egg safely to the ground after being dropped from the roof of a nearby building. Analyzing the Challenger space shuttle disaster has given my engineering and science students an opportunity to see the effects of groupthink and poor organizational communication strategies in a realistic business environment. But most importantly, faculty have spent time with students discussing the applicability of these skills to the world of business. We are asked to explain how an informative or persuasive speech can help our students in their careers. We are challenged to help students see the connection between theory and application in various fields of study. We often find ourselves in the position of justifying and/or promoting the value of our courses.

Such justification will continue to challenge us to reflect on the goals and value of teaching communication skills. The small department must continually justify its existence in order to secure financial and human resources. By adapting or modifying the courses we presently teach to meet the demands of careerism, we can garner new support while maintaining our theoretical heritage. Those of us in small communication departments can have a significant impact on our campuses by providing all students with effective communication skills as well as the ability to properly diagnose communication problems.

Yet, we must bear in mind the lessons learned in the previous decades. The curricular changes of the 60's and 70's reflected the increased emphasis on experiential learning, often at the cost of teaching the theoretical bases of our field. While our students learned many and varied skills, they sometimes lacked a clear understanding of why those skills were effective or ineffective. Many large and small departments have

reintegrated theory and experience in their courses, enhancing each in the process. We must remember that teaching the fundamentals of communication is a sound and necessary objective regardless of the latest trend in education or a student's career goals.

The focus on careerism has distinct and certain benefits for our field and our students. A degree in communication is becoming the new "liberal arts" degree. As such, we must keep in mind Bert Bradley's definition of a liberal education. He says that a liberal education is "one that transcends occupational concerns, that enables an individual to cope with shifts in values, vocations, careers, and the environment."⁹ Again, this calls for the presentation of general principles which can be applied in a variety of contexts and situations.

As we continue to become an information society and as our nation's businesses reach out to meet this need, our students will have the opportunity to become the men and women of a new era involving human communication strategies. The technology that created the information society will also create the opportunity for us to return to the ways of Aristotle and Plato - scholars in many subjects, but chiefly in the nature of the human being. Small departments can meet this challenge best by modifying our course material while keeping within the boundaries of our traditional course offerings.

ENDNOTES

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- ⁵ Kerr, Clark. "Higher Education: In Transition Once Again." *Education Digest*, Vol. 50, No. 9, pgs. 14-17.
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- ⁸ Johnson, John R. and Szczupakiewicz, Nancy. "The Public Speaking Course: Is it Preparing Students with Work Related Public Speaking Skills?" *Communication Education*, Vol. 36, No. 2, April 1987, pgs. 131-137.
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